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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000407

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA
LONDON FOR POL - GURNEY

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NP](#) [GON](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: KING PONDERING POSSIBLE POLLS NEXT YEAR

REF: KATHMANDU 0279

Classified By: AMB. MICHAEL E. MALINOWSKI. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Royal confidant Prabhakar Rana told the Ambassador on March 3 that King Gyanendra is considering holding national elections by May 2005. There was no indication of when an official announcement might be made. While we view free and fair elections as the best way to restore Nepal's derailed democracy, the King's strategy for encouraging the participation of estranged political parties--at least as described by Rana--has been tried before with no success. We believe that relations between the parties and the Palace have not improved sufficiently to warrant significant optimism that an all-party government is likely. There does appear, however, to be growing support for elections within the Government. End summary.

KING CONSIDERING ELECTIONS

¶2. (C) On March 3 Prabhakar Rana, a confidant and business partner of King Gyanendra, told the Ambassador that he had been instructed by the King to relay to the U.S. his views about holding long-delayed national elections. Rana said the King had begun seriously weighing the possibility of holding national elections by May 2005. (Note: This projection differs from the October/November timeframe we have heard suggested by others, including, recently, the Prime Minister. End note.) Local elections could be held "whenever and wherever possible." The King wanted to convey that he would welcome foreign assistance, to include election monitors, to help ensure free and fair elections, Rana stressed.

¶3. (C) The King recognizes that successful elections will require the participation of the political parties, Rana explained, and is contemplating two separate scenarios to encourage their cooperation. First, he might convoke a meeting of leaders of major political parties to brief them on his recent visits in western Nepal (Reftel) and to explain his current thinking on elections. Alternatively, he might invite party leaders to join an all-party government, led by Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, to prepare for elections. The King realizes the parties would likely reject this offer, Rana said, and is thus prepared to offer as a fall-back proposal the possibility of joining an all-party government under a different Prime Minister. Membership in the Cabinet would be open only to those who would not run in the election, according to Rana, and the purpose and term of the new interim government would be limited to holding the elections. (Note: These are the same conditions that the King set for membership in the Cabinet of former Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand. None of the protesting political parties accepted the offer. End note.) The King realizes that only the Election Commissioner can set the date for elections, Rana said, but added that the King may announce his plans for an all-party government and hopes for elections during his visit to Pokhara on March 28.

INDIANS REPORTEDLY IN FAVOR

¶4. (C) Rana said that the only other foreign mission apprised of the King's plans is the Indian Embassy. According to Rana, Indian Ambassador Shyam Saran indicated that his government would support plans to hold elections. Rana reported that he plans to travel to New Delhi March 7-8 to brief Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra on the King's thinking.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) We have been pressing the Government of Nepal for some time to review seriously possibilities for elections. This communication marks another indication--we have had

several recently--that the Government is beginning to do so. There are a number of factors that must be carefully considered; the likelihood of violent Maoist efforts to disrupt polling is just one of numerous significant hurdles the Government must confront. That said, free and fair elections are clearly the best resolution that we can envision to the protracted political stalemate and the suspension of representative democracy. We are concerned, however, that the King's strategy for attracting support from the political parties, at least as described by Rana, seems a rehash of the same Palace proposals the parties have rejected several times already. We have seen no subsequent improvement in the chilly relations between the parties and the Palace that leads us to believe that this time prospects that the parties will cooperate are any brighter. If anything, the King's recent round of visits to Maoist-affected areas--where no national political leader has dared or bothered to appear for years--has further exacerbated the politicians' distrust and suspicion of his motives. Under these circumstances, a unilateral announcement from the King heralding the onset of elections that had not been thoroughly briefed to the parties beforehand is unlikely to be welcomed by them. We will do our part to urge the parties' participation, but we will also urge the Palace to meet the parties halfway by consulting with them earlier, rather than later, in the process.

MALINOWSKI